September 2009

S·E·A·L·I·F·T

The U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command

MSC helps NASA prepare for new lunar missions

Pg. 4 Article by Meghan Patrick

U.S. Navy photo by Laura Hammond

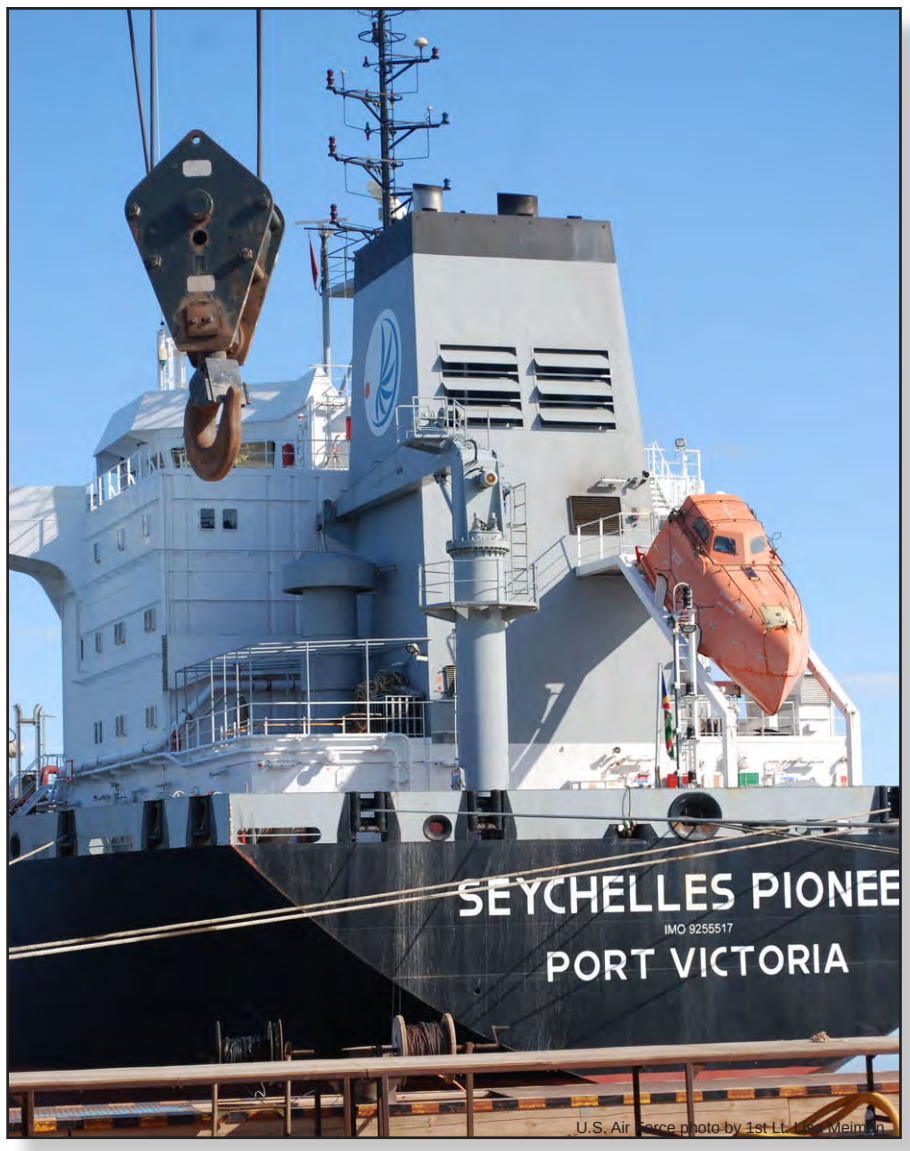
INSIDE — Heezen searches for sunken Vietnam War aircraft • Comfort returns home to First lady's welcome

I don't do UNREPs and I don't play in the band

That's because I'm stuck in this office doing the admiral thing while you have all the fun.

Okay, I know that it's not all sunshine and roses out there, but in the crush of each of us getting our part of the mission done on time and under budget, we sometimes forget the big picture of what it is that MSC is doing around the world every day.

This is my "50,000-foot view" of some of the highlights and achievements that you, the people who are MSC, have accomplished recently.



U.S. Air Force photo by 1st Lt. Lisa Meiman

MSC-chartered tanker MV Seychelles Pioneer sits off the pier in late July near Thule Air Base, Greenland, as the ship's multi-national crew waits to offload fuel as part of Thule's annual re-supply activity Operation Pacer Goose. The oil tanker delivered almost 10 million gallons of diesel fuel – enough to fuel the air base for one year. During July and August, ships from all over the world delivered critical cargo to sustain operations at Thule and other military and scientific installations in the area, including Canadian military posts stations Alert and Eureka, Danish meteorological outpost Station Nord, and National Science Foundation research outposts Summit and NEEM stations.

Piracy

Due to the alertness and competence of MSC crews taking ships through the Gulf of Aden and other dangerous waters, no pirates have taken any of our ships. Meanwhile, we all pray for the safe release of the eight vessels and 164 crew members who are in pirate custody. With the southwest monsoon abating, we expect more pirate activity, so be on your toes and follow procedures.

Pacer Goose

Every year, MSC makes the resupply run to Thule Air Base in Greenland. This year, we delivered 9.9 million gallons of fuel and all the food, replacement parts and other supplies the base needs for another year. You made it look easy.

HSV Swift

There seems to be no end to the good uses to which we can put HSV 2 Swift. African Partnership Station is using Swift to transport more than 70 people, including students from African partner nations, 6th Fleet instructors, French translators, a security team and mission command staff on visits to Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Gabon, Togo, Liberia and Gambia. The trip will offer professional exchanges on seamanship, environmental stewardship and maritime awareness, along with humanitarian and civic outreach opportunities.

Offshore petroleum distribution system

USNS Lawrence Gianella, one of our T-5 tankers, joined MSC offshore petroleum distribution system ship MV VADM K.R. Wheeler off the coast of South Korea in mid-August to demonstrate our capability to move fuel to shore facilities from eight miles out to sea at the rate of 1.7 million gallons per 20-hour operational days. That's up to half a million gallons more than previous systems from twice as far out to sea. It's a better way to support our combatant command customers ashore, and it's MSC at its innovative best.

End of an era

After two and half decades of honorable service to the Marine Corps through MSC, MV PFC James Anderson Jr., MV 1st LT Alex Bonnyman and MV Cpl. Louis J. Hauge Jr. were returned to their owners. All three ships were forward deployed and served in Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. Their operational experience has provided a basis for current prepositioning doctrine. Bravo Zulu to all those who served aboard over the years. They gained valuable experience and offered total commitment and service to our nation.

Humanitarian aid/civil assistance

Continuing MSC's support for humanitarian and civil assistance missions, USNS Comfort deployed to Latin America and the Caribbean for four months in Operation Continuing Promise 09. The MSC civilian mariner crew, embarked Navy medical personnel, non-government organization volunteers and members of other U.S. services provided medical services to more than 100,000 people in seven countries during the mission. Seabee construction projects, community relations events and tours also touched the lives of the people in the regions visited.

The U.S. Air Force Southern Band brass quintet, which was embarked aboard Comfort, helped strike up the band, a Navy tradition, during an underway refueling.

Pacific Partnership

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS Richard E. Byrd sailed in support of Operation Pacific Partnership 2009, visiting Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Republic of the Marshall Islands and Kiribati. The 120 embarked personnel will perform three civil engineer projects and four medical civic action projects during the visit to Samoa, improving hospital and clinic infrastructure and providing basic life support training to police, firemen and Red Cross staffs ashore. It's another case of MSC people helping others around the world.

Mariner and Vessel Protection Act

Here at headquarters, our congressional liaison folks have been monitoring and providing information to Capitol Hill staffers as the Mariner and Vessel Protection Act is introduced. The bill would provide immunity for civilian mariners who are involved in responding to pirate attacks if they injure or kill the attackers. The mariners would have to undergo U.S. Coast Guard-certified firearms training. Details are being worked out. Stand by for more information.

Talisman Saber

On the far side of the world again, and down under, several MSC ships participated in Exercise Talisman Saber in Australia. MSC delivered the combat cargo and equipment needed by ground forces at the Australian Defence Force Shaolwater Bay Training Area in Queensland. Dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS Amelia Earhart supplied underway replenishment services for the USS Essex Expeditionary Strike Group during the exercise.

Everywhere, around the world, MSC people are executing the mission, getting it done for the war fighters we support.

MSC 60th anniversary

It may slip by without a lot of fanfare, but Oct. 1 marks the 60th birthday of Military Sealift Command. Born in the aftermath of World War II and combining the ocean-going assets of four separate agencies and departments, Military Sea Transportation Service became the single managing agency of strategic sealift for the Department of Defense. After undergoing a baptism of fire in the Korean War, the MSTS name was changed to Military Sealift Command in 1970 during the Vietnam conflict.

I'm proud of our 9,000-plus workforce around the globe, especially the more than 80 percent who serve at sea. With our MSC-controlled fleet of more than 160 ships, we at MSC provide U.S. Navy fleet support; perform special missions for DOD and other government agencies; strategically place combat equipment and supplies at sea for rapid delivery ashore; and deliver combat cargo to deployed U.S. forces. Around the world...every day... we deliver!

Keep the faith,

Robert D. Reilly Jr.
Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy
Commander, Military Sealift Command

Sealift is an authorized publication for members and employees of the Navy's Military Sealift Command. Contents of this publication are not necessarily the official views of or endorsed by the U.S. government, the Department of Defense or the Department of the Navy. *Sealift* is published monthly by the Military Sealift Command Office of Public Affairs as authorized under NAVPUBINST 5600.42A. Submission of articles and letters should be addressed to Editor, *Sealift*, Military Sealift Command, 914 Charles Morris Court, S.E., Washington Navy Yard, D.C. 20398-5540; phone (202) 685-5055 or DSN 325-5055; fax (202) 685-5067; or via e-mail to sealift editor@navy.mil. All photographic submissions must be sent via e-mail, express mail or parcel service.

COMSC *Rear Adm. Robert D. Reilly Jr., USN*

Director, Public Affairs *Timothy Boulay*

Editor *Meghan Patrick*

Writers *Edward Baxter, Singapore*
Bill Cook, Norfolk, Va.
Susan Melow, Norfolk, Va.
Laura Seal, Washington
Rosemary Heiss, Washington
Sarah Burford, San Diego

Art Director *Dale Allen, Washington*

Graphics *Susan Thomas, Washington*

Military Sealift Command reports to the Commander, U.S. Transportation Command for defense transportation matters, to the Commander, U.S. Fleet Forces Command for Navy-unique matters and to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition for procurement policy and oversight matters.

Printed on recycled paper

MSC ship joins search for missing U.S. aircraft off Vietnam

By Edward Baxter
SEALOGFE Public Affairs

In mid-June, Military Sealift Command oceanographic survey ship USNS Bruce C. Heezen joined an ongoing U.S. humanitarian mission, working to account for Americans missing as a result of past U.S. conflicts.

During June 11-22, Heezen's crew surveyed seven sites, located within 12 miles of Vietnam's coast, for sunken U.S. aircraft. More than 450 helicopters, fighter jets and transport planes involving unaccounted-for Americans are believed to have crashed into the South China Sea during the Vietnam War between 1966 and 1971.

Heezen's underwater search operations mark the first time the Vietnamese government has permitted a U.S. Navy oceanographic survey ship to conduct an underwater search mission, or any other offshore mission, since before the war began more than four decades ago. Five representatives from the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons embarked on Heezen at Nha Trang for the duration of the search to maintain liaison with Vietnamese government officials ashore and to assist in keeping the survey areas clear of fishermen and nets.

The search was sponsored and initiated by Hawaii-based U.S. Joint Prisoner of War/Missing-in-Action Accounting Command, or JPAC, which leads the humanitarian effort to account for missing Americans, including those who went missing during the war in Southeast Asia. JPAC was created from the merger of the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory – the largest forensic anthropology laboratory in the world – and Joint Task Force – Full Accounting Command, both of which are located in Hawaii. Heezen's deployment was part of JPAC's 95th joint field activity since 1988.

More than 1,330 Americans who went missing in and around Vietnam were still unaccounted for as of May 2009, according to the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office. Many of these individuals perished in aircraft that crashed into the South China Sea, their human remains trapped in the metal that eventually sank to the muddy ocean floor only a few miles from shore.

Heezen was summoned into the search by JPAC because of the 329-foot ship's unique hydrographic survey launches, which have shallow water survey capabilities. Heezen's side-scan sonar can detect objects on the seabed using sound. In addition, JPAC provided the mission with a magnetometer, which detects metal. Together the devices can detect semi-buried and buried aircraft at oceanographic depths shallow enough for salvage divers and crews to look for and potentially recover human remains.

"The use of an oceanographic survey ship on JPAC's search operations in Vietnam could significantly expedite the discovery of underwater crash sites," said Army Lt. Col. Todd Emoto, commander of JPAC's Detachment Two in Hanoi.

JPAC officials said the 12-day survey yielded promising results, but that it is too soon to state with confidence that the objects Heezen detected are missing aircraft. Further investigation at a later date will be needed to confirm the exact nature of the objects.

Heezen's senior naval oceanographic office representative Robert Delgado, who lost friends and classmates during the war, and Heezen's civilian master Capt. Robert Reish, are strong believers in the mission. Both men took the opportunity to attend a ceremony on June 24 at an airfield near Da Nang to pay tribute to remains, believed to be those of U.S. service members who perished during the Vietnam War. The remains were loaded onto a U.S. Air Force C-130 plane and flown to Hawaii for further forensic testing.

"I can think of no other mission that has been more rewarding for me as captain of an oceanographic vessel," said Reish.

Heezen's deployment to Vietnam marks the third occasion that MSC oceanographic survey ships have been asked to assist in locating aircraft on the sea floor since 2007. USNS Mary Sears located the wreckage of a downed commercial airliner off Indonesia in January 2007, and USNS John McDonnell located a Filipino Air Force C-130 aircraft in September 2008.


U.S. Navy photo

In a sobering ceremony held at an airfield near Da Nang, Vietnam, June 24, the remains of U.S. service members are loaded aboard a U.S. C-130 transport plane destined for the United States. Draped in U.S. flags, the remains were being repatriated to the United States from Vietnam as part of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command's ongoing search mission for U.S. personnel lost in action during the Vietnam conflict. Capt. Robert Reish, master of USNS Bruce C. Heezen, attended the ceremony.

Yukon gives high school students taste of life at sea

By Sarah E. Burford
SEALOGPAC Public Affairs

Eleven high school students from Imperial Beach, Calif., opted for an unconventional summer job this year. Instead of flipping burgers or guarding lives at the beach, the group of rising seniors and recent graduates spent six weeks aboard a 678-foot oiler refueling Navy ships at sea while working as paid apprentices to Military Sealift Command.

Since 2002, MSC has played an integral role in the Mar Vista High School Regional Occupational Program Maritime Academy in Imperial Beach. This highly unusual high-school vocational program is specially designed to give students authentic maritime experience before they start their careers or continue their education. Students complete a series of maritime courses and participate in a summer internship aboard an MSC ship at sea in addition to taking normal high school classes. During the past seven years, nearly 300 students have participated in the classroom portion of the training curriculum, and 180 have participated in maritime apprenticeships on board MSC ships.

From July 5 to Aug. 15, students sailed off the coast of San Diego on MSC fleet replenishment oiler USNS Yukon, working as deck and engineering department apprentices. The students shared the same living quarters as the ship's crew, which "enhanced their experience living and working at sea," said Rich Nichols, Mar Vista High School's program coordinator.

Mar Vista student Vanessa Valle served as an ordinary seaman apprentice during her assignment aboard Yukon. She was amazed to participate in Yukon's carefully orchestrated, at-sea refueling operations with Navy combatant ships. No classroom lecture or textbook could ever compare with actually seeing two large Navy ships sailing side-by-side, maintaining constant speed and distance apart while connecting fuel hoses pumped thousands of gallons of fuel to the receiving ship.

"I was a little nervous about how the crew would act toward us because we're just kids," admitted Valle. But Valle quickly learned that she was as much of a team member as the seasoned mariners.

Every student who participates in the maritime apprentice program on board MSC ships first completes a two-semester academic course offered at Mar Vista High School to students in their junior and senior years. Following the classroom portion, students must qualify as U.S. merchant mariners, meeting the same employment requirements as their civilian and civil servant mariner counterparts. Students must meet physical fitness requirements, pass a drug test and obtain a U.S. passport and the proper documentation of their qualifications from the U.S. Coast Guard, including a Merchant Marine Document and a Transportation Worker's Identification Card. Scholarship funding is available to help with the approximately $400 out-of-pocket documentation costs.

"We do everything we can to help these kids succeed in this program," said Nichols. "If they aren't afraid to work hard, they can learn a lot from the opportunity and from the mariners they work with. Even if they don't plan on a career in the sea services, what they come away with from our program are lessons they will be able to use throughout their lives."

From their first day at work through their last, the student mariners work side-by-side with the civil service mariner crew. Depending on what part of the ship they were assigned to, their days consisted of working with hand tools, heaving lines, stripping and painting, watch standing, forklift operating, loading and unloading cargo, and welding – every duty necessary to keep a ship moving at sea.

"These kids came in here with a great attitude," said civil service mariner Dan Glazer, Yukon's chief mate. "They were always ready to work, on time, and happy to do what was asked of them. You can't ask for more than that. Their interest and dedication is what helped them integrate with the crew and make this a good learning experience."

Mar Vista High School ROP Maritime Academy opened in January 2002 with the mission to train students and promote careers in the U.S. maritime industry, especially in the critically undermanned, unlicensed ratings within the deck and engineering departments. The idea to create the school came from a former MSC area commander, retired U.S. Navy Capt. Ray Addicott.

The full cost per student is approximately $10,000, which includes training in watch standing, safety, seamanship and certification as a qualified member of the engineering department in concurrence with U.S. Coast Guard standards. The academic program is funded by the Sweetwater Regional Occupation Program, state education grants, trade unions and private companies. The shipboard apprenticeship employment is funded through the MSC Merchant Marine Student Employment Program.

"I've never been around this kind of work before, but I really like it and the crew," said Robert Foster, an engineering apprentice. "As soon as I finish up my apprenticeship, I'm going to try to get hired by MSC. If that doesn't work out, I may go to college or a maritime academy, and I might end up returning as an officer."

Nichols credits the 2009 program's success to the students' hard work and good attitudes, and to the support of Yukon crew members.

"Yukon's crew really went out of its way to help us, teach us and accommodate us while on board the ship," said Nichols. It's truly been a great experience."

Inter-agency team

From the sea, to the moon

By Meghan Patrick
MSC Public Affairs

We're going back to the moon, folks."

Those exciting words grabbed the attention of Capt. Jason Kennedy, master of Military Sealift Command rescue and salvage ship USNS Grapple, as he listened to the opening remarks at an operational planning meeting at NASA's flight facility at Wallops Island, Va., last June. Kennedy's ship was going to have a major role in a NASA test-of-concept mission launch in July.

"In salvage and rescue, no two jobs are alike, but boy, did those words get me," said Kennedy, who led his 36-person crew and 14 divers from Navy Expeditionary Combat Command Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2 in an important recovery operation for NASA.

The ship's historic mission occurred on July 9, one mile off the coast of Virginia, when the Grapple team used its giant shipboard crane to retrieve three massive pieces of spacecraft, totaling 25 tons, from the Atlantic Ocean floor.

Each piece Grapple retrieved was a section of a rocket that NASA launched 7,000 feet into the sky one day earlier at Wallops Island. The launch was a simulated test of NASA's recently developed Max Launch Abort System, or MLAS, which provides an emergency means of escape if an error occurs during the first few minutes of flight. NASA is interested in the MLAS concept, which was proven successful during the test, because it is a valid alternative for the escape system used on Orion spacecraft, which NASA plans to use for its first series of lunar missions since the Apollo program ended in 1972.

In both systems, motors pull the launch-abort capsule, which contains the astronauts, away from the booster rocket. After the combined-launch abort system and capsule are stabilized and oriented properly, the launch-abort system separates from the capsule and falls to the ocean below, while parachutes on the capsule guide it down.

Standing by for the call

Anticipation and excitement grew as the master and crew stood by for their call to action, which would follow NASA's rocket launch. On July 8, the day of the MLAS rocket launch, Grapple participated in a towing exercise with Navy Aegis guided missile cruiser USS San Jacinto at sea, 80 miles away from the Virginia launch site.

On July 8, the NASA rocket launched successfully. As planned, seven seconds after launch, the rocket's bottom section – its interior motor cage and boost skirt, identifiable by four protracted fins – detached from the main crew module and dropped to the ocean below. The coast skirt, the section of the rocket above the boost skirt, detached at 16 seconds. At 40 seconds, the nose of the crew module, the capsule at the top of the spacecraft, tilted over the water and followed suit.

Each piece landed in water three-quarter miles from the launch site. For five minutes – long enough for astronauts to exit the craft in a real situation – the pieces bobbed in the waves, surrounded by several parachutes. But as the spacecraft pieces became waterlogged, they began to sink, eventually lodging themselves in the muddy depths 20 feet below the surface.

Grapple Arrives on Scene

When Kennedy and the Grapple crew got word of the successful launch, they arranged to finish up their towing exercise by midnight so they could sail to Wallops Island early the next morning.

Meanwhile, back at the launch site, important members of the recovery team got right to work. Navy divers led by MDSU 2 company commander Chief Warrant Officer Robert Wantowski began working off small boats only one hour after the MLAS launched. The divers removed parachutes and located the components and rigged lifting slings until Grapple arrived on scene at 8 a.m. on July 9. With the divers' findings, Grapple crew members were able to begin the critical lift operations a few hours after arriving.

Gaining a full picture of NASA's simulated test with as much detail as possible would be important to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the new MLAS system, explained Hayden Gordon, a scientist who supported the project as a contractor for NASA Wallops Island. Grapple's recovery of the submerged rocket parts would be essential to this picture.

"While we conducted many, many tests before and after the launch, nothing is better than being able to give the finished articles to the engineers for examination and analysis," he said.

Grapple was also tasked with the retrieval of the video cameras that were attached to the nose of the bullet-shaped rocket before launch – critically important to the study. While the cameras provided live-stream footage to observers during the test, recovery of the actual tapes was necessary for high-definition detail of the test results.

"This need made the recovery time-sensitive," said John Valliant, NASA's surveillance and recovery coordinator. "The high-definition pictures suffer the risk of water damage or complete loss the longer the cameras are submerged."

Grapple's retrieval of the fiberglass material of the spacecraft section was also an urgent matter. The slippery pieces could slide along the floor with ocean currents, which could move the pieces to greater depths, making them more difficult to retrieve.

"Our [NASA's] capabilities were limited at this point," said Valliant. "We needed Grapple's assistance. We couldn't have retrieved the parts without the salvage crew or the divers."

Despite several adverse conditions, Grapple's master and crew persevered.

"A few complications presented themselves from the start of the recovery," said Kennedy. "The 18-foot-high spacecraft sections landed in 24 feet of water, which was too shallow to hover the ship directly over the pieces."

Four- to five-foot waves provided another challenge.

"We moved past our obstacles quickly, however, thanks to the leadership of my department heads, officers and the bright, hard working crew on Grapple," said Kennedy. "They are the ones who make any salvage or tow operation possible."

To further complicate the operation, the capsule – the top section of the rocket – landed in the exact position that both salvage team members and NASA scientists had hoped would not occur. In one of the test planning meetings, Mark Helmkamp, Military Sealift Fleet Support Command class manager for rescue/salvage and tow vessels, created an impromptu drawing of three possible scenarios. "Good" showed the capsule on its side. "Better" showed the capsule in an upright position, which meant the only force required was the lift, and "bummer," showed the capsule nose-down stuck in the mud.

"Everyone at the NASA meeting looked at me in disbelief when I showed them my drawing," said Helmkamp. "One person said, 'you don't think that will actually happen do you? The odds aren't great enough.' I told him I've been in salvage and rescue operations for 29 years, and that 'trust me, it could happen.'" And it did.

To Helmkamp it was clear: when the crew-module capsule had hit the ocean floor, the capsule had rolled around on its side for a few minutes before locking into place nose-down. The positioning added to the urgency of Grapple's task. The lift would require more planning and take longer to execute, endangering fragile film. The cameras, attached at the nose, were buried below the surface and impossible for retrieval by the divers until the section was lifted.

Levity along with the lift

While some members of NASA's rocket safety team boarded Grapple to help guide the crew in handling the rocket pieces, most of the NASA scientists watched the crew operate from the flight facility control center ashore using surveillance cameras.

"It was fascinating to watch how Captain Kennedy, his crew and his divers work together," said Gordon. "It's like nothing we've ever seen before. We were so absorbed

nwork

in watching them. We observed them in the initial stages, and nothing seemed to be happening. They kept walking around surveying. But within a few hours, they pulled a big piece of spacecraft up from the ocean floor [with the shipboard crane]. It looked completely pre-orchestrated, because it was. Instead of pulling the object up and then deciding what to do with it, they had a concrete plan before beginning the lift. I've never seen anything like it."

"They're just dynamite people to work with," said Valliant. "Some of the best I've worked with in 20 years."

Kennedy was equally intrigued with NASA, which brought dynamic technology to a lift operation he has conducted many times. The scientists followed the entire recovery from behind the surveillance cameras and interacted with the crew, frequently asking questions about specific steps in the operation.

"Captain Kennedy was really tickled that he was being watched," said Gordon. "On a couple of occasions, I caught him off-guard by saying 'we're watching you.' His response tickled me back. He thought it was so neat that we could visually follow what he was doing."

"We really learned a lot from each other," said Kennedy. "We had fun too. Lots of puns were exchanged. As we explained the salvage side of things to them and they asked questions, we joked with them. 'Guys,' we'd say, 'this isn't rocket science.'"

To watch the video of NASA's MLAS test go to: http://www.nasa.gov/exploration/features/mlas.html

Cover: A Military Sealift Command civil service mariner directs his fellow CIVMARs, who are operating the ship's massive crane, where to place the recovered rocket section on salvage and rescue ship USNS Grapple's deck to ensure a gentle landing.

Above Left: NASA launches a squat test rocket into the air at NASA's flight facility at Wallop's Island, Va. on July 8 at 6:26 a.m. The launch, which lasted approximately one minute, was a successful test of concept for NASA's Max Launch Abort System, or MLAS, an alternative astronaut escape system for NASA's Orion spacecraft. NASA plans to use the Orion spacecraft for its first series of lunar missions since the Apollo missions ended in 1972. On July 9, Grapple's master and crew and divers from Navy Expeditionary Combat Command Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 2 recovered the rocket pieces from the Ocean floor for NASA scientists to examine .

Right: Grapple CIVMARs hoist another rocket section onto the ship.

Graphic: MSC and Military Sealift Fleet Support Command capsule recovery planners described potential capsule landing positions and possible recovery challenges to a group of NASA scientists at a MSC-NASA recovery planning meeting in June.

NASA Photo Illustration

HQ • HIGHLIGHTS

Civil service mariner **David Rowley** became the first person to be selected for the Military Sealift Command Unlicensed to Licensed Mariner Degree Program Aug. 4, when MSC commander, **Rear Adm. Robert D. Reilly Jr.**, signed the approval for Rowley's request. Rowley, who has been sailing with MSC for almost seven years, will attend Texas Maritime Academy at Texas A&M University in the fall. His tuition and salary will be paid by MSC while he attends school. Upon completion of his degree and U.S. Coast Guard licensing requirements, Rowley will return to an MSC ship qualified to sail as a licensed member of the crew.

More than 50 people from MSC, the Navy's Bureau of Medicine, U.S. Transportation Command and the Assistant Secretary of Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition rode MSC hospital ship USNS Comfort from Norfolk to Baltimore Aug. 3-4 as the ship was returning to its layberth after a four-month deployment. The ship ride was intended to familiarize participants with hospital ship missions, functions and operations. Ship riders received tours of the ship's flight deck and medical spaces. Medical Treatment Facility commanding officer, Navy **Capt. James Ware**, briefed guests on the history of Continuing Promise, the mission that the ship had just concluded.

MSC headquarters recognized more than 15 members of the workforce July 28 for their length of government service and extraordinary performance. **William Zeller**, Sealift Program, **Paul Devoe**, Naval Fleet Auxiliary Force, and **Bonnie Jackson**, comptroller's office, received recognition for 30 years of government service. **David Lyle**, planning, **Shawna Edmonds**, comptroller's office, and **Mark Coggins**, Sealift Program, were recognized for 25 years of service. **Margaret Seward**, maritime forces, manpower and management; **Allison Bednarek**, **Marc Bromante** and **Norman Wolf**, engineering; **Lynn Bowling**, comptroller's office; and **James Beliveau**, Special Mission Program; were honored for 20 years of government service. **Theresa Curbelo**, maritime forces, manpower and management; and **Ronald Whittingham**, inspector general's office, were recognized for 15 years of service. Devoe, who received a 30-year-pin, also received a Meritorious Civilian Service Award. Navy **Lt. Cmdr. Miguel Lake**, Reserve Programs, received the Meritorious Service Medal. Expeditionary Port Unit 104, from Syracuse, N.Y., received a letter of commendation from the Chief of Naval Operations for service at Military Sealift Command Office Kuwait from Feb. 16 to Nov. 16, 2007. Navy **Capt. Andrew Gallotta** and Navy **Cmdr. William Powers** received the award on behalf of EPU 104.

MSC welcomes **Linsey Becker**, **Janine Cowell**, **Danielle Grisson**, **Brendan McCauley** and **David Strickland**, engineering; **Ronald Ortega**, contracting; **Kimberly Foxx**, office of counsel; and **Robert Donaldson**, Naval Fleet Auxiliary Force.

The command bids farewell to **Joseph Cowen**, command, control, communication and computer systems; **Miae O'Connor**, comptroller's office; **Silvia Molinillo-Corral**, contracting; and **Alan Edkins**, who retired Aug. 31, from his job with Naval Fleet Auxiliary Force.

SEALOGCENT changes leadership

By Laura Seal
MSC Public Affairs

The command responsible for providing air and sea logistics to the U.S. Navy in the Middle East changed leadership Aug. 3 in Manama, Bahrain.

Navy Capt. Donald D. Hodge took command of Military Sealift Command's Sealift Logistics Command Central from Navy Capt. Stephen H. Kelley, who has held the position since July 2008.

Hodge reports to SEALOGCENT from Naval Surface Group Middle Pacific in Hawaii, where he served as chief of staff.

In his new role as SEALOGCENT's commander, Hodge will also serve as commander, Task Force 53, and commander, Logistics Forces, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. In these roles, he is responsible for coordinating the air and sea delivery of people, mail, cargo, fuel, ammunition and provisions to a fleet of 40-plus U.S. and coalition ships operating in Middle Eastern waters.

"I am honored to be back in Bahrain and serving with these recognized experts in logistics," said Hodge. "SEALOGCENT and Task Force 53 have a long-standing reputation for delivering the goods, and I am proud to be part of that team."

Under Kelley's leadership, the command oversaw 1,100 underway replenishments at sea involving the delivery of 178 million gallons of fuel to ships in theater and 484 million gallons of fuel to Department of Defense fuel-distribution depots. The command also supported more than 5,500 air logistics missions and managed a daily average of nine ships and 10 aircraft in theater. In addition, the command's aviation unit coordinated and moved more than 15,000 tons of cargo, 6,000 tons of mail and 38,000 passengers during Kelley's tour.

"The 13 months of my command here have seen many changes," said Kelley. "The shift from Gulf-centric operations to operations outside the Gulf – along with 200 percent growth in logistics in support of ships conducting counter-piracy operations – has put emphasis on our air and trucking resources in addition to our logistics force ships."

Following his tour at SEALOGCENT, Kelley will report to Naval Surface Warfare Center Dam Neck, Va., as its 25th commanding officer.

COMPASS • HEADING

Military Sealift Fleet Support Command finalized the re-verification of the command's international safety-management document of compliance in July. "The auditor was extremely impressed with the professionalism shown by all personnel involved in the audit," said **Fred McKenna**, MSFSC deputy director. "In [the auditor's] closing remarks, he made specific reference [to] the excellent documentation and planning involved with ship repair and maintenance."

MSFSC congratulates the following Navy storekeepers who were selected for promotion to chief petty officer: **Mark Bryan** from dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS Lewis and Clark, **Nana Bonsu** from dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS Robert E. Peary and **Jose Portillo** from dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS Amelia Earhart.

Navy **Personnel Specialist 2nd Class Tiffany R. Washington** was selected as MSFSC Sailor of the Quarter for the third quarter 2009.

Combat stores ship USNS Concord sent MSFSC a bronze minuteman sculpture, which had been featured within the ship's unlicensed mess for decades. The sculpture — which is an original artwork by Daniel Chester French, best known for creating the sculpture of President Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Monument — will be placed on display at MSFSC's headquarters in Norfolk.

Fair winds and following seas to **Third Officer John McGinnis**, **First Officer Les Waddington**, **Utilityman Alfredo Pascua**, **Second Electrician Kenneth Lopez**, **Second Cook Donald Reed**, **Utilityman Ray Davis**, **Unlicensed Junior Engineer Renato Cortes**, **Third Assistant Engineer Alan Lunn** and **Utilityman Thomas Hamacher** as they enter onto the retirement roles.

For more news of MSFSC, view the on-line newsletter at www.msc.navy.mil/msfsc/newsletter.

CENTRAL • CURRENTS

Military Sealift Command dry cargo/ammunition ships USNS Lewis and Clark and USNS Sacagawea and fleet replenishment oiler USNS Big Horn departed the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations following a successful deployment in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom, counter piracy and maritime security operations. Through their dedication and attention to detail, each ships' crew played a vital role in keeping 5th Fleet forces combat ready.

Lewis and Clark, Sacagawea and Big Horn provided support to USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Strike Group, USS Bataan and USS Boxer Expeditionary Strike groups, and other coalition naval forces. The crews' flexibility was paramount to the success of the critical missions in the dynamic operating environment off the Horn of Africa and in the Arabian Gulf.

Task Force 53 Commander Navy **Capt. Steve Kelley** rewarded Big Horn, Lewis and Clark and Sacagawea with Bravo Zulus for their respective work. Big Horn conducted 49 incident-free underway replenishments, transferring more than 17.5 million gallons of fuel and delivering 2,602 pallets of cargo and provisions. Lewis and Clark conducted 93 incident-free underway replenishments, transferring more than 18 million gallons of fuel and delivering 7,401 pallets of cargo and provisions. Sacagawea conducted 50 incident-free underway replenishments, transferring more than 3 million gallons of fuel and delivering 5,900 pallets of cargo and provisions.

MSC fast combat support ship USNS Rainier and combat stores ship USNS San Jose joined fleet replenishment oilers USNS Walter S. Diehl and USNS Leroy Grumman in the U.S. Central Command area of operations in July. The ships' logistics performance in U.S. Central Command's high-operational environment is instrumental to the success of U.S. and coalition maritime operations.

In July, Navy **Capt. Joe Hennessy** was relieved as deputy commander of Sealift Logistics Command Central by Navy **Capt. Ron Carr**. Hennessy is now executive officer of Fleet and Industrial Supply Command Norfolk.

In July, 12 sailors assigned to Commander Task Force 53 and U.S. Naval Forces Central Command volunteered to help teach English to disabled teenagers and their families as part of a recurring community relations project sponsored by the Bahrain Disabled Sports Federation. NAVCENT also conducts bi-weekly meetings for its ongoing community relations project, led by Navy **Lt. Kristen Christenson**, to teach English to Bahraini citizens who plan to participate in U.S. Department of State exchange programs in the United States.

PACIFIC • BRIEFS

Military Sealift Command fleet replenishment oiler USNS Guadalupe completed its triennial individual ship assessment July 15. The assessment, an evaluation of each ship's overall security program to ensure it meets Navy and MSC force protection requirements, is administered by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service's ship-training assistance team.

Fleet replenishment oiler USNS Yukon hosted 37 members of the Chilean navy in three familiarization cruises July 19 to Aug. 1, Aug. 16-29 and Aug. 30 to Sept. 12. In 2010, Chile is slated to receive Yukon's sister ship, the deactivated USNS Andrew J. Higgins, which sailed with MSC from 1987-1996.

Congratulations to **Thomas E. Brown**, marine transportation specialist with the Sealift Logistics Command Pacific operations department, and **Ermanno Magliulo**, mechanical engineer for Military Sealift Fleet Support Command's Ship Support Unit in San Diego. Brown and Magliulo recently received length of service awards for completing their dedicated service to the federal government and were honored for 40 and 35 years of service, respectively.

Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Joshua Valcarcel

Capt. Jonathan Olmsted, ship's master of Military Sealift Command dry cargo/ammunition ship USNS Richard E. Byrd, explains aspects of the ship's bridge to the Premier of Malaita, Hon. Richard Irosaea, in the Solomon Islands Aug. 12.

MSC ships win CNO Afloat Safety Awards

By Frank Randall
MSC Public Affairs

Three Military Sealift Command ships won the 2008 Chief of Naval Operations Afloat Safety Awards, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Gary Roughead announced July 10. This is the first year that MSC has earned more than one CNO-level safety award.

Fast combat support ship USNS Bridge, rescue and salvage ship USNS Grapple, and large, medium-speed, roll-on/roll-off ship USNS Mendonca were recognized for safety achievements, earning the right to display the Navy's green safety "S" on the ship's bulwark until the next competitive cycle.

"These ships have been leaders, not only in safely executing their mission, but also in reporting mishaps and corresponding lessons learned, which helps us all get smarter on how to more safely operate at sea," said Kevin Kohlmann, MSC safety manager.

Bridge, which currently operates out of San Diego, received the award for accomplishing numerous safe underway replenishment operations and for promoting a culture in which every crew member acted as a safety observer. As part of the ship's safety program, the ship's master Capt. Jeffery Siepert briefed the crew on safety before each underway replenishment. The ship's crew held safety meetings and had a safety council, which led to improvements in forklift operations, lifeboat mustering and small boat operations.

Grapple, which operates out of Norfolk, Va., earned the safety award for the second consecutive year. In an inherently dangerous and constantly changing mission environment, Grapple's crew took unique safety precautions for each of its missions. The crew's desire to share lessons learned has made them a leader in promoting fleet safety.

Mendonca, crewed by 30 commercial mariners working for a company under contract to MSC, received the award for the crew's outstanding achievements in promoting a safety culture. Mendonca's weekly safety meetings and a safety-first attitude led to improvements in the ship's lock-out/tag-out system, mooring procedures and shipboard familiarization for new crew members.

In a message to the fleet, Roughead cited the three ships for "leadership in promoting operational excellence through effective safety risk management and hazard recognition and correction."

Rosemary Heiss of MSC Public Affairs contributed to this article.

EUROPE • NEWS

Sealift Logistics Command Europe received a Mission Capability Assessment visit in August. The Military Sealift Command headquarters Inspector General team provided an outside look at the Naples-based command's processes and training to help identify areas for improvement.

Maritime Prepositioning Ships USNS 2ND LT John P. Bobo, SS PFC Eugene A. Obregon, and USNS Sisler from MPS Squadron One were in Spain in July receiving stores.

MSC deputy commander **Rear Adm. Robert O. Wray** visited SEALOGEUR, Ship Support Unit Naples and 6th Fleet command ship USS Mount Whitney in August. During his visit, Wray discussed the spectrum of MSC operations with the staffs.

SEALOGEUR bids farewell to Navy **Lt. Cmdr. Todd Cheek**, who is retiring after 20 years in the Navy, including four years with SEALOGEUR. The command also bids farewell to Navy **Lt. Craig Ruhs**, assistant operations officer, **Theresa Aranas**, executive operations coordinator, and **Paul Augustine**, assistant force protection officer.

ATLANTIC • LINES

Richard Caldwell, supervisory marine transportation specialist at Sealift Logistics Command Atlantic, traveled to Thule Air Base, Greenland, July 15-25 to assist with MSC's annual Operation Pacer Goose mission that supplies the food, fuel, equipment and spare parts that the Arctic outpost needs to operate for the next year. Ten million gallons of jet fuel, pier maintenance equipment and materials and an airfield fire truck were a part of this year's delivery. The ships participating in the mission, MSC-chartered cargo ship MV American Tern and MSC-chartered tanker MV Seychelles Pioneer, also removed all of the base's solid waste and non-repairable equipment for return to the United States, and Canadian Coast Guard Ice Breaker CCGS Henry Larsen escorted the ships through the ice-choked waters. Thule is located between the North Pole and the Arctic Circle and is accessible by sea only from mid-June to mid-September due to thick ice that covers its coastal waters. The base, created in secret as a refueling spot for strategic bombers during the Cold War, now serves as a detection and tracking station for objects traveling over the Arctic Circle and employs more than 1,100 U.S. Air Force, U.S. Coast Guard and multinational personnel.

During the month of July, **Joe Guivas, Jack Davis** and **Lyndon Flynn**, marine transportation specialists at Sealift Logistics Command Atlantic's Beaumont, Texas, office, provided support to five tankers in Houston, Texas, at various terminals to load 404,235 barrels of fuel and discharge 225,922 barrels of fuel in support of Department of Defense operations worldwide.

On July 14, the Beaumont personnel discharged cargo from MSC-chartered roll-on/roll-off ship MV Green Lake, which brought back 759 pieces of equipment – helicopters, wheeled vehicles and other general cargo – from Iraq. The following day, the personnel back loaded Green Lake with 66 similar pieces of equipment destined for Iraq. From July 24-25, the Beaumont team discharged 829 pieces of rolling stock and containers, also used in Iraq, from MSC-chartered roll-on/roll-off ship MV Arc Liberty.

Richard Bolduc, marine transportation specialist at SEALOGLANT's Jacksonville, Fla., office, assisted with the Joint-Logistics-Over-the-Shore exercise in Guantanamo, Cuba, from July 1-11. On July 29, Bolduc and **Allen Dickerson**, also from the Jacksonville office, helped coordinate the load-out of more than 1,000 pieces of U.S. Marine Corps equipment from Maritime Prepositioning Ship USNS GYSGT Fred W. Stockham.

From July 4-12, **Tom D'Agostino**, marine transportation specialist at SEALOGLANT's Charleston, S.C., office, assisted the Jacksonville office with the fuel offload of MSC tanker USNS Lawrence H. Gianella. From July 4-5, D'Agostino assisted with the discharge of 169,000 barrels of fuel from MSC-chartered tanker MV Houston in Charleston. From July 19-21, D'Agostino assisted with the offloading of 1,266 pieces of equipment from Green Lake, including 224 mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles destined for service in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

MSC rescue and salvage ship USNS Grasp completed its yard period in Charleston on July 28.

Welcome aboard to Navy **Lt. Cmdr. Bryan Hudson**, who joined the SEALOGLANT team on July 27 as diving officer and assistant operations officer. Hudson served on active duty for more than 16 years and as a U.S. Navy Reservist for more than four years. He is originally from San Antonio, Texas, but has resided for the past seven years in Virginia Beach, Va. Hudson's last assignment was with Riverine Squadron Two.

SEALOGLANT wishes fair winds and following seas to Marine Transportation Specialist **Jimmy Boy Dial**, who retired on July 31 after 32 years of government service. In addition to civil service, Dial is a Vietnam War veteran.

FAR • EAST • HAILS

Military Sealift Command-chartered heavy lift ship MV Ocean Force discharged USS Avenger, the second 224-foot mine countermeasures ship to be delivered to its new home at Fleet Activities, Sasebo, Japan, July 10. MSC-chartered ship MV Condock IV offloaded USS Defender June 3. **Tom Walters**, Military Sealift Command headquarters Sealift Program, and **Thad Reap**, Sealift Logistics Command Far East Sealift directorate, served as on-site MSC representatives for the offload. Both mine countermeasures ships were delivered from their homeport of Ingleside, Texas.

British Indian Ocean Territory Commissioner Colin Roberts visited Maritime Prepositioning Ship Squadron Two flagship MV SGT William R. Button at Diego Garcia on July 29. Roberts, who is based at the Foreign and Commonwealth office in London, serves as the administrator for all United Kingdom-owned territories around the globe. MPS Squadron Two's new chief staff officer Navy **Lt. Cmdr. Brent Holbeck**, who recently relieved Navy **Lt. Cmdr. John Adams**, briefed Roberts, along with Britain's appointed island representative Royal Navy Cmdr. Richard Stevens on Maritime Prepositioning Force assets and operations in the Indian Ocean. Squadron commander Navy **Capt. Tony Martin** led Roberts and Stevens on a tour of the vessel. "The prepositioning ships carry an impressive amount of equipment, which continues to play a vital role for both U.S. and British interests in the region," Roberts said.

Navy **Capt. Jim Romano**, SEALOGFE commander, visited Diego Garcia June 30 to July 3. He met with Martin and Naval Support Facility commanding officer Navy Capt. Hugh Flanagan. Romano also addressed MPS Squadron Two ship masters during a quarterly meeting and met with Military Sealift Command Office Diego Garcia commanding officer Navy **Lt. Cmdr. Paul Springer** and his staff.

Navy **Cmdr. Paul Grgas** assumed the duties of SEALOGFE chief staff officer July 1. Formerly the command's operations officer, Grgas relieved Navy **Cmdr. Curtis Lenderman**, who reported as MSC's liaison officer to U.S. Fleet Forces Command in Norfolk.

MSCO Okinawa welcomes Navy **Senior Chief Boatswain's Mate Gene Palabrica**, who relieved Navy **Senior Chief Boatswain's Mate Richard Guilfoyle** as the command's operations officer.

On July 7, MSCO Korea bid farewell to Navy **Storekeeper 1st Class Arnel Betita**, who was relieved by Navy **Storekeeper 1st Class Dayan Ade**.

Navy **Lt. Cmdr. Jon Marlar** reported as MSCO Korea's executive officer July 28, from Naval Education and Training Security Assistance Field Activity, Pensacola, Fla.

CIVMARs bring Comfort home

By Laura M. Seal and Meghan Patrick
MSC Public Affairs


U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Benjamin Stratton

Diego Josue, an eight-month-old Salvadoran boy born cross-eyed, and his mother, Mari'a Concepcio'n Algeta, await a USNS Comfort surgical team July 7 in Corinto, Nicaragua, following his successful surgery. "When Algeta saw her son, she broke down and cried — it was a really touching moment," said Navy Capt. Tim Donahue, M.D., Comfort's director of surgery. Dozens of Comfort's civil service crew members agreed.

Sixty-three civil service mariners aboard Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Comfort returned to Baltimore Aug. 4 after completing a four-month humanitarian and civic assistance mission to Latin America and the Caribbean. Crew members felt the effects of the physically and emotionally demanding deployment; yet they were exhilarated by the completion of a mission that delivered medical and dental care to more than 100,000 less fortunate people in seven countries.

The mission, called Continuing Promise 2009, was planned and coordinated by Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command and U.S. 4th Fleet to build strong and enduring partnerships and demonstrate the lasting commitment of the United States to the region. Comfort visited Antigua and Barbuda, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua and Panama.

While Comfort's CIVMARs operated and navigated the ship, Comfort's team of Navy medical personnel worked side-by-side with medical professionals from other U.S. military services, the U.S. Public Health Service, more than 270 volunteers from numerous nongovernmental organizations and an additional 71 medical professionals from host and partner nations to staff Comfort's shipboard hospital and shoreside medical treatment sites.

Comfort's mission team also included veterinarians who treated 13,238 animals and Navy Seabees who completed 13 construction projects ranging from minor renovations of facilities to building new schools.

While the number of patients treated, countries visited and miles traveled are impressive, the individual experiences of each crew member and host country national tell this mission's story best.

Among those impacted by the mission are a grandmother in Antigua who received cataract surgery aboard Comfort and saw her grandsons for the first time through tears of joy; a young mother from El Salvador who sold the family pig and traveled by bus to Nicaragua so that her son – born cross-eyed – could receive corrective surgery; 42 elementary students in the town of Havillal, El Salvador, who now have a new school; a 70-year-old farmer in Antigua who received much-needed medical care for his cattle, helping to nurse them back to health following a long drought; and two-year-old Joan Obando of Colombia who received surgery for a club foot.

"I'm a parent, so when I think of kids with cleft palates, genetic deformities or various illnesses being helped by the people on the big white ship with red crosses, I'm moved beyond expression," said Capt. Thomas Finger, Comfort's civil service master.

While Finger and his crew did not treat patients, not a single patient could have received care without close coordination between the medical mission and Comfort's CIVMARs.

Finger was part of a unique, three-part leadership structure that included two Navy captains – one who was in charge of the ship's hospital and medical mission and another who had overall responsibility for the mission's success and coordinated with the crew, the shipboard hospital, the host nations and all other partner entities to plan and execute each day's operations.

Not only did Comfort's CIVMARs navigate the ship safely to each mission stop, they carried patients and doctors when the ship was anchored as far as seven miles off shore, unable to pull pierside at all stops except in Panama due to the ship's massive size. Comfort is 894 feet long – nearly the length of three football fields – and has a draft of about 33 feet.

To bridge this watery gap, Comfort's CIVMARs operated two 33-foot utility boats to transport hundreds of patients and mission personnel between ship and shore each day of mission operations. The boats were painted to match the ship – white with red crosses – and worked in tandem with Comfort's two embarked helicopters, which also provided transport between ship and shore.

"MSC's role in most of our missions is to support. This mission was different because we were directly part of the end goal," said Thomas Sellers, Comfort's navigator and one of the utility boat drivers. "I felt a profound sense of accomplishment every day."

The CIVMARs' work was not only above deck. Below deck, the mariners played a crucial role in the daily activities that took place on the shipboard hospital. The engineering department ensured a constant, reliable supply of electricity and water to the hospital wards and operating rooms, where 1,657 life-changing surgeries were conducted.

Mariners from the deck department also played an important role in the medical procedures. The skill required for a successful operation in a ship hospital does not reside solely in the hands of the doctors and nurses. Four levels above the operating rooms, on the ship's navigational bridge, the CIVMARs took skillful action to ensure that the ship remained steady enough for surgery. In Nicaragua, when the ship began rocking in eight-foot swells, hindering surgeons from conducting eye surgeries, Finger and his bridge-team sprang into action.

"We conferred with the surgeons in the OR to act quickly and get the ship underway because ships are more stable when moving than when they are anchored," said Finger. The doctors were then able to successfully make the highly delicate movements required for eye surgery.

While the surgeries will be remembered, so too will the images of Comfort itself.

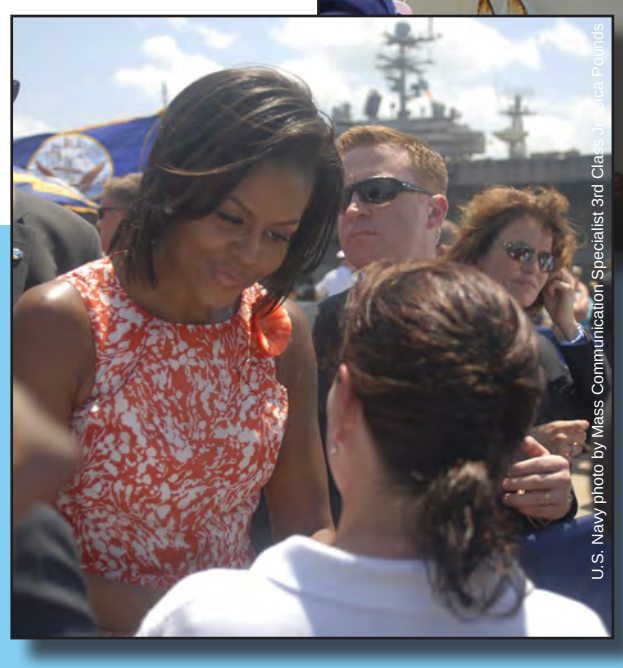
"People were amazed at the size of the ship," said Able Seaman Gene Degle, who also worked transporting patients on the utility boats. "Some of the patients brought cameras on the boat and started taking pictures of the ship as soon as the boat departed shore. I told them to save their pictures until the end, and when we approached the ship and they realized just how large it was up close, there was silence. Their mouths just dropped."

Degle noticed that the patient's emotions were not limited to amazement by the platform's size. "I'll always remember the faces of those coming on board for medical treatment," he said. "As soon as they passed through the gate you could see by their expressions that a big burden had been lifted from them."

"There is no doubt that every person on this ship – every civil service mariner, service member, medical personnel and non-governmental organization volunteer – did phenomenal work," said Finger. "The patients in every country we visited were grateful and impressed by the willingness of people on the ship to leave their families for months to help those less fortunate."

With more than 30 years of experience sailing for MSC, Finger said of this mission, "It's the most personally rewarding assignment I've ever had. Anyone who has participated in this mission even for a short while would recognize the value it has in helping others and in bridging cultural and national boundaries."


U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Desiree Green


U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Jessica Pounds

First lady welcomes Comfort home to U.S.

By Rosemary Heiss
MSC Public Affairs

First lady Michelle Obama honored the crew of Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Comfort July 31 for a job well done after completing the ship's four-month deployment to Central and South America.

"I am delighted to be here in Norfolk today to welcome home so many heroes," she said. "This is a happy day for the community of Norfolk and families of these brave men and women. We are standing here among heroes – military, civilian, American and foreign."

During her speech, Obama expressed her gratitude for all that has been accomplished by the military and the humanitarian and civil assistance mission of Comfort.

"The Comfort embodies our values by changing lives around the world," she said. "Your legacy continues through the learning that happens in the classrooms that were built. It lives on in the young mothers who learned how to properly care for their first child, in the town that now has fresh drinking water."

Obama also addressed the importance of the service of the people aboard Comfort.

"Each of you have courageously served our country and demonstrated your commitment to uphold America's highest ideals. At a time when danger and opportunity spreads freely across borders, we know that the security and prosperity of all people is shared. So when the Comfort helps folks meet their basic needs abroad, then we advance the cause of security and prosperity everywhere around the world," she said.

"We're also advancing our values in the most fundamental way that we can – by living them through deeds as well as words. This is the spirit of service that the crew of the Comfort exemplifies."

Obama spent several minutes talking to Comfort's civil service Master Capt. Thomas Finger and Military Sealift Fleet Support Command Chief of Staff Navy Capt. Al Woods to express her appreciation for their service.

While in Norfolk, the first lady also welcomed home aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, which returned from a deployment supporting Operation Enduring Freedom the same day as Comfort.

Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Gina Wollman, Navy Public Affairs Support Element East, contributed to this article.